

Elm

from The Sadness of Sex

Stories by Barry Yourgrau

A woman's sex breaks loose from between her legs and escapes out into the streets. It terrorizes a residential neighborhood for an entire afternoon. A dapper old geezer hobbles over outward it right after its appearance on the sidewalk and makes the mistake of jauntily trying to handle it and gets a finger bitten off for his presumption. A gang of teenage truants who taunt it in a garden are driven away howling. It flaps and seethes after them, snapping off the sticks and baseball bats with which they try to fend it away. One of the youths relates his terrified drama over the radio, of how he tripped and fell down and only saved himself by hiding for over an hour in a trash can, while not two feet away in the alley it squatted gnawing on a rusty bicycle pump. Most disturbingly, a dozen schoolchildren on their way back from a museum visit are traumatized by the sheer sight of it. They huddle together wailing and sobbing long after it has disappeared. Every so often a single childish voice still bursts into pathetic screams. The teacher can be heard gasping on the radio in half-sentences. "Tender young psyches" and "in ruins" are phrases she repeats numerous times.

Around dusk the escapee scuttles up into an elm tree and there the authorities surround it. It keeps them at bay, flapping and spitting from the branches. A policeman crawls up with a snaring pole and has it wrenched from his hands. A nasty stalemate ensues.

I listen to the account of all this being broadcast on the radio. I turn my head. Someone's at my door. I switch on the porch light. It's a bulky, worried-looking man, wearing, in the old-fashioned manner, a hat. He announces himself as a deputy to the mayor. "Can I come in?" he says. I extend my hand toward the room and he steps in past me. I indicate the armchairs. We sit. He gets right to business. "And not only is it a public outrage," he concludes, "but it's only a matter of time before someone loses more than a finger." He grins with difficulty. "And it's a terrible embarrassment to the city, and the mayor," he adds. "Something's got to be done, immediately. You've got to help us." I lean back in my seat. "Me?" I ask. "Why me? What about the woman to whom, how shall I put it, it 'belongs'?" He shakes his head. "She's too distraught," he says, "Well, you can imagine—" He shrugs. "I mean, how would you feel in her position?" he declares, coloring slightly in the lamplight. I don't answer. He leans close. "Listen, we all know your books down at city hall," he says, an intent look on his face. "We're big fans, we think you have a special understanding, a facility, about these" — he makes a vague motion with his hands— "sensitive matters. That wild story about all those ladies washing themselves," he says. "And that other one, about those wigs up a —"

"Then you'll also know full well that I've just gone through a tremendously difficult and disabling time, won't you?" I interrupt. I get to my feet. I walk over to the mantle. "I'm in no position to have a relationship right now," I mutter, my back toward him. "My God, no one's asking you to have a relationship!" he protests from the room behind me. "We're simply asking for your help for just one evening." I don't answer. I stare at the mantle. "Please," his voice beseeches, from closer behind. "We're desperate. You're the only one we believe can save the situation. Think of the innocent people— the kids," he adds. I roll my eyes at the hyperboles. "What is this, some grade-B cop thriller?" I mutter. "What's that?" he says. "Nothing." I sigh. I

close my eyes. I rub my hand over my face. I let out another sigh. "Alright," I murmur, "alright, alright." I turn blearily toward him. "It'll take me a few minutes to get ready," I tell him.

In the bathroom, my hand trembles as I shave and then find the old cologne bottle and the jar of pomade. I take out my dark blue suit, the one I always look good in. I still do. I give my brown-and-white-striped tie a last tug in the mirror and shake my head with a grunt, at the ripple of memory and melancholy. "Alright, let's go," I exclaim somberly, reemerging. "To do this one hundred percent I'd normally stop off for a boutonniere, but we don't have the time."

Our official car maneuvers through the police blockades. We turn a final corner and the scene is in front of us. Squad cars and fire trucks pack the end of the street like a disorganized mass of cattle. A couple of spotlights are trained into the upper branches of the elm tree. A fire ladder probes the forbidding, leafy darkness. Its rungs are empty and ominous. The crowd, the curious and the frightened, staring from the barriers for glimpse of melodrama in the red, slow lashing of the squid-car lamps. It's a circus, a bloodletting, a zoo with cage doors broken.

The deputy explains to the police chief who I am. The chief holds a big red handkerchief to his nose against the faint, celebrated smell of fish in the air, as we walk hurriedly along. "This is what I want," I declare quietly, my eyes fixed on the locale in the branches right above the ladder. "I want this entire street cleared, I want each damn one of these spotlights off, I want nothing here but this ladder truck." "You must be crazy!" the chief barks through his handkerchief. "There's no way I'll authorize anything like that. Do you realize what could happen if—" "Listen," I snap, swinging about, "I do this my way, or I don't do it at all." There's a stark pause, taut with stares. "Do what he says!" the mayor's deputy cries, "Do exactly what he says!"

The chief swears and turns away. He starts to shout blurrily through his bullhorn.

Fifteen minutes later, the street is empty. There is only the elm and the ladder from its truck, and me, and the moonlight. The black hulk of the mayor's deputy's car watches from the end of the block with its lights off. I take a breath and look up along the diminishing metal parallels. I whisper good luck to myself, wet my lips and start climbing. The only sounds in the street are my steps mounting one after another from rung to rung through the dark branches, and the lilt of the ballad I'm whistling. My eyes are fastened on the ladder top. From above the growing saline aroma sends down a ripple through me. I press slowly on. At last, without incident, my head and shoulders clear into the zone of high leaves. The scent in the moonlight is tangy and unadulterated. I pause there, clutching on and whistling now in a tender, ultra-intimate tempo. The melody tugs soft and piercing at the my heart, as I smile right at my quarry, crouched not more than a couple of feet away, in the saddle of two branches. It resembles an innocent head of hair of a young brunette child. Streaks of exposed wood gleam pale near it, where it gnawed away the bark in its fits of temperament. Slowly, gracefully, I exhibit an open hand to it, with fingers relaxed and slightly spread. "Hello there, you beautiful oyster," I whisper huskily. "I know you and your kind, you moonlit kitten, you pretty sea muffin ... you sweetmeat with your pride of fur still on! So pretty, so pretty," I coo, as I reach very gently forward and touch it.

Lightly I begin stroking, employing just my fingertips. The mons veneris feels tense, dry. I continue this nerveracking procedure for several sustained minutes, alternately whispering and whistling. The soft, plush hair sends a throb through me. I blink away sweat. I swallow and start to feel about delicately for the little pink knob. I find it. I commence my attentions three— gently,

gently, just with the soft pad of a fingertip. I feel the muscles begin to relax, and then the first moisture. Fresh waves of pungency rise over my head. I tremble powerfully at them, and lean close and slide a finger into the cleft. The lips turn immediately slick. I work away there, then back to the knob, feeling the spasms of response. My breath grows hectic. I grunt, in labor, and involuntary appreciation. My wrist is starting to ache. I wiggle up awkwardly another rung, so that I'm several feet well clear of the ladder top. With a flutter of trepidation swampy with desire. I slip my hand away as deftly as I'm able, so both right and left can grip the ladder. I bend forward. "May I?" I murmur in a thickened voice, as my heart throbs through me, and I lower my mouth. The old taste is briny but sweet, almost fruity, like melon and seawater. My tongue finds the little knob right away. Expert as ever, it worries it. I maneuver about with increasingly firm, fervid, lingering strokes. Memories flood me. I plunge my whole face down, shoving my tongue deep into the sloppy cleft. I rub with my nose and shake with my cheeks and work my tongue to a fare-thee-well. The object of my attentions bucks around under me. The ladder starts to sway and dip as the two of us go at it for all our worth, up among the leaves and branches, under the gaze of the moon. Suddenly my balance goes, and I burst away and hang on wildly as I swing outward, and then treeward, on the ladder's swiveling pendulum. I throw back my goo-plastered head and laugh in abandon and intimacy up through the greenery, up at the blinking stars. I manage to stabilize myself at last against a branch and I give a clearing pull over my face with my hand. "Come on, you angry, oceanic mouse," I whisper to it, smiling in all tenderness. "Time to go home. . . ." I extend my dapper arm. Slowly, it climbs onto my wrist. It mounts wagging up my sleeve. I feel its sopping heat through the material. It perches finally on top of my shoulder. I start down as carefully as I can on wobbling legs, laughing gently as my burden nuzzles my neck. After a couple of pauses for rearranging along the way, I step down at last onto the bed of the ladder truck and then, finally, onto the street. The mayor's deputy's car rolls slowly toward us...

Sometime later, the car turns onto a street of brownstones in a different part of town. "And thank you again—for all of us," the hatted figure calls quietly through the window, as I start to mount the steps to a front door. The car pauses, then drives off into the night. I watch it go. I ring the doorbell. After a few moments, I hear hurrying footsteps. The door jerks open. The woman gapes at me. Then she cries out and in her emotion, covers her mouth with her hands. "Everything's fine," I reassure her, "Everything's fine." I present my shoulder toward her. She reaches out with both hands and seizes the warm, plump epaulet. I make a gesture of understanding, for her not to concern herself at all with ceremony. She turns and hurries into the house. "Please come in, I'll just be a minute," she cries back.

After closer to thirty minutes, she finally reappears, smoothing her dress over her thighs. She's tidied herself up nicely, though she's obviously still feeling great emotion. She comes partway into the room, and then she halts. She lifts her hands, but at a loss, drop them. "How can I ever thank you?" she says. Her face is colored deeply. She rushes up to me and embraces me. I pat her back in empathy. "What can I get you to drink?" she says, stepping back. I shrug. I name something. She goes over to the sideboard and fixes two of the same. I take my glass from her. We sit. I keep my jacket still buttoned. We clink and sip. There's a pause. In the silence she grins with awkward emotion. Her gaze drifts down to her lap, and she laughs suddenly, shaking her head. She looks at me. Her eyes sparkle. I smile back in labored pleasantness. I put my drink on the coffee table. I rub one hand with the other. "Listen, I'm afraid

I feel I need to say this," I slowly declare, my eyes on the table. "Please understand, I was very glad to be of help, and I hope, I truly hope you know I had a very, very lovely time." I prod the drink coaster with a pair of fingers. "But I'm still recovering, you see, from a very difficult situation of several years' duration," I explain, "And I'm still not whole. I'm in no position right now to get involved. . . "

The woman gazes back at me, grinning, a mix of strong emotions working her. "I understand," she says huskily.

I stay awhile longer, and then she sees me to the door. We embrace warmly without speaking. "Goodbye," she calls out softly after me, as I go down the steps. "Goodbye," I call back. I start up the street. The moon is still out and I decide to walk. The night is cool. I turn up my jacket collar. I sniff at my fingers for a moment, and snort quietly, and sigh deeply, and incline my head against the tide of memories as I make my way along through the sleeping town.